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TESP 122: Good and Evil

March 17, 2021

The URL for this project is:

<https://paulymorphism.com/other/tesp-122/>

Final Project Transcription

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Introduction

In this website/paper, we will examine the nature of evil and faith through a variety of historical accounts across different eras. And with the help of a series of modern media portrayals I will give my opinion on the nature of evil and faith as well as answer the question of “is there a place in the modern world for religion’s existence?”

Part I: Evil and Faith Pre-Industrial Era

Within the Christian Tradition, faith is generally tied with good. Having faith in Jesus’ teaching entails that one is willing to live a life of redemption for their original sin as a human. The Old Testament teaches obedience to God is faithful and is considered good. Obedience is also mentioned in the New Testament. So, faithfully practicing Christianity in general is considered good.

However, there are a couple of different arguments around these notions. For example, the Manichees would argue that evil stems from a higher being that is equally as powerful as God. So, evil is essentially a God that is opposite to the good God. This is a valid argument that acknowledges the coexistent of good and evil while highlighting evil is not created by the good God that people worship. The argument is also quite convenient and doesn’t offer a great deal of insight into the nature of evil.

Augustine provided a more interesting account for evil that says evil is not explainable. By this property, evil is absurd, so anything that can be explained is automatically good. Using Medea as an example, it’s not hard to see that Medea’s actions cannot be logically justified. All of her actions can be explained by simply ‘passion.’

Part II: Modern Historical Perspectives

The industrialization has introduced a newfound form of evil that previous accounts didn’t consider that is rational, larger in scale and is responsible for hundreds of millions of deaths. This evil has its traces in the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the holocaust and democide. There are absurdities in these massive atrocities but if we apply the Augustinian logic to these evils, we more often than not can find a justification in the name of ‘progress.’ The Nazi German concentration camps are heavily industrialized institutions that treats humans as mere objects because of one person’s ideology. Similar things were happening in the east Asian battlefield during World War II where the Imperial Japanese believed that they were the best race and therefore should claim all of the world for themselves. In Soviet Russia, Stalin implemented policies that are geared towards ‘progress’ but in reality, caused millions of deaths. Same thing can be seen in Mao’s China and North Korea.

Another byproduct of the industrial revolution is that science gains the upper hand in people’s mind over religion. Therefore, religion and faith now became irrational for the most part. This sharp turn in what is rational places religion and faith in an awkward position. On one hand, there’s the Augustinian view which has become integral to the Christian tradition. On the other hand, Augustine also thinks that evil can’t be explained. And now religion is falling into the category of being harder to explain using reason.

Which begs the question, is faith still valid in the modern world?

Part III: Evil’s Portrayal its relation to Faith

In this section we consider a couple of portrayals of evil in modern media and put them into the modern historical context and analyze them in light of how faith and religion play a role. Some examples in this section include *X-Files*, Season 7, Episode 9 (“Signs and Wonders”); *King of the Hill*, Season 4, Episode 18 (“Won’t You Pimai Neighbor?”); *Ip Man 4*; Solar Opposites Season 1, Episode 7 (“Terry and Korvo Steals. Bear”). This selection is chosen for specific reasons. The *X-File* episode provides an insight into how traditional belief differs from the modern world. In the episode selected from *King of the Hill*, the writers of this episode presented a question of what the purpose of faith is if a person lives in a surrounding that is relatively ‘mundane’ and devoid of the traditional evil. The *Ip Man* films presents a scenario when a person is faced with great systematic evil but although doesn’t have religion to back it up, still has faith. And finally, the *Solar Opposites* episode presents an example of when religion negatively influences society.

To start with, we take a closer look at the *X-File* episode. To summarize the plot of the episode, the audience follows the protagonist detective to solve a series of murders committed by rattle snakes. The episode also establishes two different church organizations that both practice the Christian tradition. On one hand, there is O’Connor’s church that faithfully practice the teachings of the Old Testament and take all accounts in the scriptures literally. O’Connor himself is a very charismatic person that is able to convey his faith effectively to his followers and make them just as faithful. O’Connor’s church was primarily practicing the tradition where God is vengeful and very strict with enforcing his commandments. On the other hand, Mackey’s church follows a postmodern perspective where God is accepting, and individual believers can critique and interpret the text however they want. Pausing there, the show’s creators made their stances clear by portraying O’Connor’s establishment and practices to be cult-like. And they intentionally made the audience feel uneasy when viewing scenes of O’Connor’s church. I think aside from being effective in establishing the twist, this portrayal also made it clear that the old practices of Christianity have little reason to remain in the modern world. They give the impression of being dated. This is exemplified when a scene of the two churches were teaching the same passage. One was shown to be following the scripture literally word by word, whereas the other church put the text into historical context and allowed individual interpretations. But at the same time, the fact that there is literally a snake inhabiting the modern reverend, Mackey’s, body symbolizes that the modern church also has an evil within. I think this evil can be interpreted as the church being corrupt under the name of righteousness. For example, early in the millennium, there were child molesting scandals, monetarily corrupt churches, etcetera. So, I think the writers of this episode is implying that although there is nothing wrong with believing in a religion, the traditional practices are dated and the modern organization that supports religion can be systematically corrupted and might be contributing the larger evil in society.

To give a little bit of background information, King of the Hill is a show about the Hill family as they deal with everyday struggles as they learn lessons from the experiences. This episode focusses on the Hills and their Laotian neighbor the Souphanousinphones. The Hills are a family of Christians while the Souphanousinphones are a family of Buddhists. One day soon after the Buddhist Lama passed, the Souphanousinphones were preparing their daughter Connie to take the test to see if she’s the next Lama and compete against another Laotian Buddhist child for that position. Bobby Hill, in an effort to give Connie the upper hand, accidentally passed the test and was deemed an unexpected candidate for the next Lama and waits for the ultimate test. Finally, during the finale of the episode, Bobby Hill learns that Lama cannot marry. Since he’s dating Connie, he chooses Connie instead of being the spiritual leader of millions. A couple of key insights are presented in the episode.

Kahn Souphanousinphone (Connie’s father): Sees Buddhism as nothing but a tool to gain power, connections and leverage over others. He doesn’t go out of his way to practice rituals or learn the teachings of Buddhism. As a result, Connie never got a chance to witness a true Buddhist ritual as “there’s no one for [her father] to meet” in those Buddhist communities. However, when the monks came to perform the test, he was keen to ask the monks to stay at his place. But once he has learned that his daughter will not be selected, he told the monks to set up tent in his front lawn.

Hank Hill (Bobby’s Father): A faithful Christian who attends church every Sunday. He interrupts Bobby’s enlightenment ritual and tells him the reason why he’s not allowed to practice Buddhism and why they go to church every Sunday is because they are Methodist Christians. But when asked what exactly Methodism is, Hank failed to provide an answer so has to visit the reverend with Bobby. The answer they got was simply that Methodism is a rejection of Calvinism. When the reverend congratulates Bobby on possibly to becoming a Lama, he tries to tell the reverend that they are on “the same team.” And refuses to believe that Bobby can be a Buddhist and love Jesus, questioning Bobby’s faith to Chrisitanity.

Bobby Hill: Follows his father to church every Sunday but seems to not know exactly why they do it, similar to his father. But when he was led to believe that he’s the reincarnated Lama, he went on a spiritual journey and managed to inspire people around him with his ideologies. But, at last, when he learned that becoming a Lama will prevent him from following his love, he chose love.

At first glance, this episode sets out to call out the modern everyday people’s shallowness in their faith in the divine and paint a narrative that religion has lost its way in the modern world. But I would argue this episode is highlighting the usefulness of religion as a means to discover ourselves. I find this to be the most relevant especially given that most people are not thinking about the evils in this world. And more importantly, this episode helps highlight an undeniable ‘good’ side of religion in this world with evil.

Ip Man 4 tells the story of a Chinese Martial Art (CMA for short) master Ip Man as he moves to San Francisco in search of a new life. One theme of the film is how CMA survives racism through the perspective of a CMA master. One of the story lines is following a Chinese American soldier trying to introduce CMA to his superior who is racist in denial. The superior was seen treating people of color poorly but being respectful to fellow white individuals. Another theme is how a lot of Chinese masters of CMA thinks teaching this art to other races makes the art less pure. But the relevant moral of the story to the discussion of faith and evil is that racism is the evil here. And although the evil is not directly addressed through religion, we are shown a very strong faith by the protagonist that he believes at the end of the day, we are all humans, so this hatred based on race is unnecessary. This faith is not fueled by religion, but rather a strong personal belief.

Lastly, the episode in Solar Opposites. To give some background for the episode, Solar Opposite is a show about an alien family as they emergency landed on earth and their journey to fix the spaceship and keep going on their journey. It’s been a running gag where one of the kids Yumyulack will shrink anyone that annoys him and store them inside the wall of their house. The gag evolved into a full episode about the power hierarchy in the society in the wall and a working-class revolution against the system governed by ‘the Duke.’ The revolution was led by a singular worker named Tim who was imprisoned during which his cellmate would publicize his ideals to the oppressed workers. The situation is portrayed much like the Russian monarchy society before the communist revolution. And after Tim managed to overthrow the current monarch, ‘the Duke,’ and discovered that there is a way to escape ‘the wall,’ he chose to rise to power and rule the wall. The story has close ties with religion since there is a widespread belief that Jesse, the other alien kid, shows mercy and love to the people so it gives everyone hope. ‘The Duke,’ takes advantage of the belief and injects his own propaganda into the belief system to mislead the people into believing that he’s also good and trustworthy. I think this shows a weakness in religion and faith being taken advantage of by a malicious individual or group and one should stay vigilant. For example, ISIS is associated with the Islamic belief but has nothing to do with true Islamism. Cults whose sole purpose is to take advantage of its faithful believers is still widespread. So, religion can play the role of being part of what makes the world evil or support it.

Part IV: Conclusion

By examining the historical context of evil, we observe a tendency for evil to turn from irrational passion to become more rational and justified by certain narratives. I believe this shift indicates that evil is neither defined by its irrationality nor by its rationality. Instead, it is characterized for its consequence and caused by human’s desire. This is not to say that human desire itself is evil, because evolution favors those that are fit for survival. Human developed the desire for more over the course of evolution. It brought great progress but also atrocities. On the other hand, faith is also a form of desire, the desire for good and spiritual existence higher than oneself. From the portrayals of faith and evil in the film media, it seems that religion is a form of faith but also can be a carrier for evil. People practicing religious rituals might not entirely get what they are doing it for if they are not experiencing great evil. On the other hand, religion can carry strong faith under the existence of evil. However, religion is also capable of spreading evil as shown in the X-File episode and the Solar Opposite episode.

All in all, evil and faith both came from the same root, desire. Religion does have a place in today’s world by helpin